Chaos spreads as U.S. leaves Somalia: [FINAL Edition]

By Mark Fineman The Los Angeles Times . By Mark Fineman The Los Angeles Times.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

BY THE END of this week, the bulk of the American ground forces assigned to the long and sometimes painful U.S. military mission to help save Somalia from self-destruction will be gone - most of them ferried out by sea in a costly yet discreet withdrawal operation designed to limit further U.S. casualties in a land where most Americans believe too many already have died.

At the heavily guarded Mogadishu seaport, there were few signs of that chaos as the troops boarded the Empire State for home. None wished to speak about last year's prolonged, U.S.-led military hunt for Somali warlord Gen. Mohamed Farah Aidid, which climaxed last Oct. 3 in a bloody firefight that left 18 American soldiers and hundreds of Somalis dead and reversed U.S. policy in Somalia.

After the battle, U.S. President Bill Clinton abandoned the UN-sanctioned hunt for Aidid, the prime suspect in an earlier massacre of 24 Pakistani peacekeepers, and ordered a massive military buildup to cover America's withdrawal from Somalia before March 31. The pullout is expected to be completed a week early.

FULL TEXT

MOGADISHU, Somalia - A U.S. Marine sniper team peered through gun sights atop the Empire State merchant ship Sunday afternoon, scanning the horizon of a city slipping deeper into chaos by the day, as 277 American soldiers flanked by the high-powered cannons of two Bradley fighting vehicles quietly marched up the gangplank.

On Tuesday, another ship will dock at Mogadishu's seaport, the Greek cruise ship Mediterranean Sky. Also amid strict security, more than 500 U.S. troops will march aboard, bound for the Kenyan port of Mombasa and a passenger jet for home.

BY THE END of this week, the bulk of the American ground forces assigned to the long and sometimes painful U.S. military mission to help save Somalia from self-destruction will be gone - most of them ferried out by sea in a costly yet discreet withdrawal operation designed to limit further U.S. casualties in a land where most Americans believe too many already have died.

At an added cost of about $13 million, the ferry service is "an additional measure of protection" against "somebody who might like to take a parting potshot" at a more visible American target in the air, said Army Col. Steve Rausch, the U.S. military spokesman here.

The high-security naval withdrawal marks the first time the United States has redeployed its forces in such a way since the Vietnam War, according to Military Sea Lift Cmdr. David Heim.

For many in the Somali capital, that fact is symbolic of the escalating chaos and fear that the U.S. military is finally

leaving behind.

In recent days, Somali gunmen have ambushed civilian aid workers and UN positions with increasing frequency.

For the first time in months, Somali militiamen attempted late Friday to fire a rocket grenade into the sprawling UN compound in Mogadishu. Half an hour later, two pickup trucks packed with armed Somalis opened fire on a checkpoint manned by Egyptian soldiers. The Italian Embassy was attacked several hours earlier.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the spiralling violence and accompanying jitters now surrounding the American pullout came just hours before the U.S. troops marched on to the Empire State.

A U.S. Marine sharpshooter at Mogadishu's airport, where the last of the American troops are bunkered waiting to go home, spotted a Somali teenager pointing a pistol at an Egyptian sentry about 300 yards away. The Marine fired a single round from his M-40 rifle, wounding the boy holding the gun and fracturing the skull of another Somali youth standing nearby.

THE PISTOL, U.S. military sources later confirmed, was a toy.

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